

# Editorial

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## Indian Conservation Service?

The Indian Forest Service was started by British colonists mainly to extract forest resources and export them to Britain, and to strengthen colonization in India. Conservation and sustainable use practiced by some forest communities and private forest owners at that time was of least consideration for the British. The officers were trained in forestry operations for extracting timber and other resources, and making profit. Therefore, the Service needed 'custodian' officers, some ruthless, who could use the 'native labour' for the 'operations'. Providing *shikar* to the visiting dignitaries was a welcome distraction, which many officers liked because they themselves enjoyed hunting. Whatever wildlife conservation was undertaken, was with the aim to provide 'good game' to the *Bada Sahib* and the royalty. For this job, one did not need a qualified officer with biology background, as the biology aspect in this extractive forestry was rather limited to knowing some commercial trees and 'game' animals; this could be taught easily during the 2-year training in the Forest Research Institute, Dehradun. There was no doubt that there were some fine officers in the service who based forest management on good science, but these were exceptions. Moreover, most of their research was confined to study the growth of commercial plant species, how, where and when to plant these species to maximize results, thinning or removal of unwanted trees and undergrowth, and how to protect them from frost, rain/drought or wild animals, and introduction of fast-growing exotic trees for commercial purpose. Graduation was the only basic degree one required to appear for the Forest Service examination.

Unfortunately, even after Independence in 1947, we carried on the legacy of the British. As far as forests (and forest dwellers) were concerned, only the exploiters had changed but not the exploitation of forest resources. As these resources shrunk, the number of forest officers went up, ostensibly to 'protect' the forest. As wildlife decreased due to hunting and poaching, sanctuaries were established, but they were 'managed' mostly by territorial forest officers who rarely had time to look after wildlife, as extraction of timber brought more money, accolade and promotion. Generally, individuals not wanted in forestry operations, or with no appropriate contacts to manage a lucrative forestry posting, were made wildlife warden, if that post ever existed in a forest division! After enactment of the Wildlife (Protection) Act in 1972, many more wildlife sanctuaries were declared, mainly due to the interest of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, but the working of the Forest Department did not change. Most of the new IFS officials were still from a non-biology background, and most of them with no inherent interest in forest and wildlife. From the mid 1970s, the role of Forest Department changed from exploitation to conservation. By early 1980s, there was a total ban on cutting of natural forest. The pressure on reserve forests and protected areas increased due to human population increase, the so-called 'development' projects, political exigencies and societal demands, but the attitude of the forest officers remained unchanged due to their academic background and training. Both systematic ecological knowledge and local community knowledge remained by and large not integrated in wildlife management.

India now has more than 600 sanctuaries and national parks, and some conservation and community reserves. Moreover, wildlife also lives outside the PA system in reserve forests and in larger landscape and seascape. Wildlife management concept has changed from 'no-hands' approach to active management, particularly considering the size of our PAs, including taking the landscape approach, trying out community-based methods, and so on. New conservation concepts have been developed, new methodologies are available, but wildlife officialdom remains in its fossilized shell, impervious to the changes taking place all around. Other than a handful of officials who are trained in institutions like the Wildlife Institute of India, the Forest Department remains ecologically illiterate. There are some exceptionally good forest officers in every state of India, who do their duty with dedication. The days when the fate of our wildlife is left to an uninterested middle-age wildlife guard and his equally uninterested bosses should be over. In this age of super-specialization, would one appoint a general practitioner for the job of a specialist in a medical institute? Unfortunately, only in the Indian Forest Service a non-biologist or non-ecologist is appointed to look after issues of ecology, habitat management, wildlife diseases, man-animal conflicts, conservation breeding, etc., and local community experts with their generations of experience *still* have no role in official wildlife management.

What are the fresh candidates of Forest Service taught? I quote from the Indian Forest Service (Probationers Final Examination) Regulations, 2005, gazette notification: Elementary Biology/Mathematics, Elementary Biology Practical, Overview of Forestry, Forest Statistics, Geology, Soil Science, Soil, Water and Land Management, and Computer Awareness and Applications in Forestry. This is in the Introductory Phase. In the Professional Phase I, they have the following subjects:

Forest Mensuration, Forest Biometry, Systematic Botany, Forest Ecology, Silvicultural Practices, Forest Economics, Silvicultural Systems, Forests Policy, Law and Conventions, and Biodiversity Conservation. There is another phase, which the IFS notification calls Phase II, where Forest Survey, Remote Sensing and GIS, Forest Engineering, Wildlife Management, Forest Production, Non-timber Forest-Produce, and Wood Technology, Harvesting and Industries. Many of these topics are taught in 5-6 lectures!

And what are the subjects taught in these various topics? Taking only two subjects, 'Elementary Biology' and 'Wildlife Management' as an example, see what an IFS probationer is taught: Botany: Morphology – classification of plant kingdom; parts of an angiospermic plant, the seed, germination, root, stem – their functions and modification; the leaf, inflorescence, flower and fruit. Histology – the cell, the tissues, cell division, histology of stems, root and leaf. Secondary growth, Physiology – absorption, and conduction of water and mineral salts, metabolism – photosynthesis, respiration, nitrogen fixation and reproduction. Tree Genetics – genetics and its application to plant improvement, and DNA finger printing.

Zoology: Classification of animal kingdom – economic importance and distinguishing features of different classes. Theory and Practical are of 10 marks each, out of the total of 865 marks! Interestingly, 'Wildlife Management', which a manager of a PA has to look as his/her main job is of only 35 marks, and that also only theory, no practical. Practical wildlife management is taught during various field visits of other subjects or during whirlwind all-India tour of the probationers.

Just imagine, in this age when wildlife management has become a highly professional job all over the world, we still have forest officers with elementary biology background\*. In the complex world of ecology, even after 30 years of research one learns everyday, but an IFS officer with non-biology background, in a 2-year training programme becomes an expert on wildlife management! For many such officers, real wildlife experts (even amongst their own colleagues) are either a nuisance or an irritant to be disdainfully tolerated.

Equally important, most forest officials are not taught to deal with the real life social and political issues that confront wildlife management both within protected areas and in the larger landscape, including relations with local communities, issues of land and resource rights, the challenges of 'development' policies, issues of poverty, and so on.

As India becomes developed, there is an urgent need to bring drastic change in the way our forest officers are selected. The first requirement is that the basic qualification for appearing in the Indian Forest Service should be biology or environmental science, or science at undergraduate level. Secondly, we should have a special Wildlife Service of wildlife professionals to look after protected areas and wildlife management. This Indian Wildlife Service should have land managers, field biologists, wildlife vets, wildlife crime detectors, and social scientists who work with local communities, as also people who come from the communities themselves. Like we have a highly trained and dedicated professional army, India needs a dedicated Indian Wildlife Service with a human face, as local communities share space with wildlife in most of our PAs; to put it another way, wildlife has to share the space in our crowded country with more than a billion people in 6 per cent of the world's land. Many countries, such as South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania, Botswana, and USA have shown that highly trained, dedicated and professional wildlife managers can restore degraded lands and depleted wildlife. We also have some very fine officers, but most of our PAs are still 'managed' by non-professionals who do not have interest to learn/use new methodologies. Thirdly, instead of Indian Forest Service, it should be called Indian Conservation Service or Indian Ecosystem Protection Service because these days most of the job of a forest officer is protection of several kinds of ecosystems, not only forests. When we have changed the term 'District Collector' to 'District Magistrate', why can't we change the term Indian Forest Service to Indian Conservation Service or something similar? During the British period, the main job of a collector was to collect revenue for the colonial power, but now it is to administer the district, with revenue generation being only a small part of the job. Similarly, the main job of an IFS officer was forestry operations – cutting timber and generating revenue. During the last 60 years as we have changed from production forestry to conservation of forest, therefore there is a need to change the title. The Government of India is planning a string of marine protected areas, some of them will be entirely underwater. Will it be appropriate for a marine protected area to be 'managed' by an officer of the Forest Service, where marine ecology is not even taught?

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\*Recently *Indira Gandhi National Forest Academy, Dehradun* has prepared a draft of the syllabus on *Wildlife Management* to be taught to IFS probationers in about 200 lectures by experts and experienced forest officers. This is a very good step in the right direction.

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